A Constable Karl Blom Mystery

THE still MAN

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The North Sea bit hard at the Skagerrak coast. A grey row of teeth composed of freezing wind and salty spray. Forty metres above the churning, charcoal-coloured water, a man who was not Karl Blom adjusted the focus of his Zeiss binoculars. To the two men shivering in the idling RIB boat moored in the shadows below, he was known simply as Jonasson. His real name, however, was a secret he had already killed for once and intended to keep buried under several feet of Swedish soil.

Through the salt-streaked glass, the mayor's new sailboat, a fifty-foot Baltic beauty christened *Folkviljan*, rocked with deceptive grace at its private mooring.

“Is he there yet?” a voice crackled through Jonasson’s earpiece. It was Lars, impatient and sounding small against the roar of the gale.

“Patience is a virtue you clearly haven’t bought yet, Lars,” Jonasson muttered, his voice barely a whisper against the wind. “The target isn’t the boat. It’s the quiet. We wait for the rhythm to settle.”

The mayor, a man possessed of a smile like a polished knife sheath, was due to sail at dawn with a lean, three-man security detail. Jonasson’s hand, steady as a surgeon’s despite the biting cold, recorded every detail, the tension in the lines, the placement of the carbon-fibre winches and the critical blind spots beneath the stern pulpit.

“The sensor on the starboard side,” Jonasson noted, speaking into his lapel mic. “It’s got a four-second lag when the hull dips. That’s our window.”

“Four seconds isn’t much,” the earpiece crackled again.

“It’s an eternity if you aren’t dead,” Jonasson replied dryly.

Tomorrow, the mayor would die in a manner that looked like nothing more than a tragic maritime ac-

cident, a snapped mast or a rogue gybe in heavy seas. The plan was surgical, designed to leave the authorities chasing ghosts. And no one in Växjö, least of all a silent, routine-loving constable with a penchant for stale coffee, would ever suspect the clockwork precision that had preceded the tragedy. Jonasson lowered the binoculars, the grey light reflecting in his eyes like flint. The hunt had already ended; the mayor just hadn't stopped breathing yet.

1. The Habit of Silence

The scent of freshly roasted beans and the musty, comforting aroma of well-aged paper defined Karl Blom's sanctuary. At exactly six forty-five, a pale Swedish light filtered through the window, washing over his solitary bookshelf and the desk where every pen sat parallel to the edge. His bed was made with military corners, sharp enough to cut a finger on and the air was as still as a frozen lake.

Karl stood by the glass, a phantom in his own home. He watched the street below for exactly four minutes, a ritual of observation that anchored him to the world. A baker, dusting flour from his apron, rattled the locks of his shop. A woman in a crimson coat struggled with a small, irritable terrier that yapped at its own shadow. Then, there was the van. Black, with

windows so darkly tinted they looked like voids, it idled at the junction for two breaths longer than the rhythm of the street allowed. Karl noted the lack of a commercial logo and the way the chassis sat heavy on its suspension. Then, with a practiced mental click, he let it go.

He dressed in his uniform with the mechanical efficiency of a soldier, trousers, crisp shirt and the blue-grey jacket bearing the Växjö constabulary patch. At thirty, Karl's face was his most effective tool; it was utterly unremarkable. His hair was the muted shade of birch bark, and his pale grey eyes seemed to absorb information without giving a flicker of emotion in return. He was the man people forgot mid-sentence, the shadow in the corner of a room. In interrogation, criminals often found themselves confessing to him simply because his silence felt like a void they were desperate to fill with noise.

Ida was already at the kitchen table, the morning sun highlighting the fine lines around her eyes, lines earned from years of nursing and, Karl suspected, years of trying to read him. She didn't look up as he entered, but she poured his coffee with a steady hand.

"You watched the van for longer than usual," she remarked, her voice soft but perceptive.

Karl took his seat, the chair scraping softly against the linoleum. “It had no reason to be there. It wasn’t a delivery, and it wasn’t a local.”

“Maybe it was just someone lost, Karl. Not everyone has a map of the city’s habits etched into their skull.”

“Lost vans don’t usually have low-profile satellite antennas bolted to the roof,” he countered, his voice flat.

Ida sighed, pushing a warm, cardamom-scented pastry toward him. “And what’s the move, then? Will you file a report? ‘Suspicious vehicle, parked legally, no crime committed, end of file.’ You’ll be the joke of the station again.”

Karl felt the ghost of a smile tug at the corner of his mouth, though it never quite broke the surface. “That is the job, Ida. Noticing the things everyone else is too busy to see.”

“That’s not living, Karl,” she said, though there was more sadness than bite in her tone. “That’s just... surveillance.”

He drank his coffee in a silence that was neither cold nor strained. It was a well-worn path they walked to-

gether, a quiet understanding that didn't require the clutter of small talk. He was profoundly grateful for her presence, for the way she navigated his stillness, though the words remained locked behind his teeth.

The walk to the station was a precisely timed twelve-minute journey. He passed the pub, its windows dark and smelling of stale lager, where he was meant to meet Lucas for a pint that evening. He passed the small harbour, where the rhythmic *clink-clink* of masts against the breeze signaled the start of the sailing season.

Then he reached the mayor's residence. It was a striking piece of modern architecture, glass walls and charred timber overlooking the shimmering expanse of the lake. It was a house designed to be seen, much like its occupant, Sten Viklund. Viklund was a man of easy smiles and pragmatic politics, currently the darling of the national security circles. Karl remembered their only meeting, a brief enquiry about a stolen bicycle found on the edge of the estate. Viklund had shaken his hand with a firm, practiced grip and dismissed him from his memory the moment the door closed.

Today, however, the atmosphere had shifted. Two men stood near the gate. They weren't the usual local

security. They possessed the particular, heavy stillness of men who carried concealed sidearms and viewed the world as a series of potential trajectories. Karl slowed his pace by a fraction of a second, his eyes scanning them. They were professionals.

At the station, the air was thick with the smell of ozone from the photocopier and the low hum of stressed voices. Detective Inspector Maja Forsell, a woman whose voice was often compared to a wire brush on a rusted pipe, slapped a beige folder onto Karl's blotter.

"Blom. Harbour break-in last night. Someone took a pair of bolt cutters to storage unit seven. The owner is a high-strung lawyer named Bergman, and he's currently screaming corporate espionage down the Chief's throat. Go and hold his hand so he stops calling us."

Karl opened the folder. The crime scene photos were stark. The padlock hadn't just been cut; it had been sheared with a precision that suggested high-grade hydraulic cutters. There were no jagged edges, no desperate scratches on the doorframe. It was surgical.

"Unit seven," Karl murmured.

Maja paused, one hand on her hip. “You have a comment, or are you just practicing your counting?”

“It’s the same unit number as the mayor’s private mooring locker,” Karl said. “Three piers over, but identical numbering.”

Maja stared at him, her brow furrowing. “You actually memorized the mayor’s locker number? Why on earth would you know that?”

“I walk past it every day,” he replied simply. “The bronze plaque is slightly tarnished. It stands out.”

“That’s not normal, Blom. Even for you, that’s bordering on a disorder.”

“No,” Karl agreed, his gaze drifting to the window. “It isn’t.”

He gathered the folder and stepped back out into the cool morning air. The black van from his street was nowhere to be seen. But as he passed the mayor’s residence again, one of the new security guards didn’t look away. The man tracked Karl’s movement with a cold, predatory focus, his hand twitching toward the lapel of his coat. Karl kept his pace steady, his face an unreadable mask, but the thread of interest in his chest had turned into a sharp, cold needle.

The silence of the morning had been broken, not by noise, but by a pattern that refused to fit.

2. The Carpenter's Laughter

Lucas Magnusson was a man who didn't so much enter a room as occupy it entirely. At six foot four, with shoulders that seemed to push against the doorframes of the local pub, he was a force of nature in a flannel shirt. When Karl pushed through the heavy oak doors of *Paviljongen* that evening, the air was thick with the scent of roasted malt and the low, comforting rumble of a dozen simultaneous conversations. Lucas was at their usual corner table, a pint of dark ale in one hand and a dog-eared photograph of his daughter, Elin, in the other.

"Karl! The ghost appears!" Lucas bellowed, his voice vibrating through the floorboards. He kicked out a chair with a grin that could light up a Växjö

winter. “Sit. Drink. You look like you’ve been thinking again. It’s a dangerous habit, Karl. Leads to grey hair and an early grave.”

Karl sat, the wood of the chair groaning under his weight. He signalled the bartender for a lager—knowing full well he’d barely touch the second half. “I’ve had a quiet day, Lucas. Mostly.”

“Liar. Your ‘quiet’ is louder than most people’s screaming,” Lucas said, leaning forward, his eyes twinkling with mischief. “What’s under the skin today?”

Karl didn’t answer immediately. He reached into his jacket and slid a single forensic photograph from the folder, placing it on the scarred wood of the table between them. It was the padlock from the harbour. Even under the dim, amber glow of the pub’s lighting, the cut was terrifyingly clean.

“You ever cut a lock, Lucas? In the trade?”

The carpenter’s bushy eyebrows shot up. He wiped foam from his mustache. “Depends. We talking professionally, or is this a ‘don’t tell the missus’ recreational question?”

“Professionally. As a craftsman.”

Lucas's jovial expression didn't drop, but his eyes sharpened. He picked up the photo, holding it between two thick, calloused fingers. "Well, if you're a hack, you use bolt cutters. You get those ugly, pinched edges, crimped metal, jagged bits. It's messy work. Why? Someone lose their keys at the marina?"

"Look closer," Karl invited.

Lucas pulled a pair of reading glasses from his pocket and squinted. The laughter in the corner of the table began to die away. He turned the photo toward the light of a nearby sconce.

"That's not bolt cutters," he said, his voice dropping an octave into a low, serious register. "And it's not a hacksaw. See that? That's a carbide blade. High-speed rotary. Someone used a power cutter with a wheel thinner than a biscuit. To get a finish that smooth, they had to have a hand like a surgeon and a tool worth more than my van. This isn't a smash-and-grab by some local kid looking for a flare gun, Karl. This is a key made of speed and physics."

"What would they want from a lawyer's storage locker?" Karl asked.

Lucas handed the photo back, his thumb lingering

on the image of the severed steel. “Maybe nothing in the locker. If I wanted to test a new blade, to see how fast I could bypass a specific grade of hardened steel without making a sound, I’d find a quiet spot to practice. Or maybe it’s a message. ‘I can get in whenever I want.’ It’s a professional’s signature.”

Karl took a small sip of his lager. The pub hummed around them, the rhythmic *thud* of darts hitting sisal, the sharp clink of glasses, the bursts of easy laughter. He felt the small, cold thread of suspicion in his gut begin to warm, turning into a steady, pulsing heat.

“You’re doing it again,” Lucas said, pointing a finger at him.

“Doing what?”

“That thing where you go silent and your eyes turn the colour of a frozen lake. I can practically hear the gears grinding in there. It’s giving me a headache just watching you. What aren’t you telling me, Karl? You didn’t come here to talk shop about hardware.”

Karl hesitated. In his line of work, trust was a currency he spent sparingly, but Lucas had been his anchor for five years. He was the only person who didn’t mind the silences.

"The mayor's sailboat," Karl said quietly. "*Folkviljan*. It's moored at the same harbour, on the same pier system. The locker that was hit, Unit Seven is the exact same number as the mayor's private equipment locker on the adjacent dock. Same manufacturer, same model of lock."

Lucas set his pint down with a heavy *thud*. The joviality was entirely gone now. "You think someone's going to sabotage a sailboat? That's a long walk from a cut padlock, Karl."

"Is it? Think about the timing. The mayor is scheduled for his first solo sail of the season tomorrow. It's his ritual, he goes out alone to 'clear his head' before the summer session. I saw the security outside his house today, Lucas. It's doubled. Men with earpieces and bulges under their jackets that aren't mobile phones. They're spooked."

Lucas leaned back, his massive frame casting a shadow over the table. His hands, scarred by decades of saws and chisels, drummed a restless beat on the wood. "Karl, listen to me as a friend. You're a patrol constable. You spend your days writing parking tickets and helping old Mrs. Nilsson find her cat. This is deep water. If there's a threat, the SÄPO boys or the

high-level detectives will handle it. This is not your fight."

"It might be no one's fight," Karl replied, his voice steady. "Not until the boat is two miles out and the mast snaps or the hull gives way. If everyone is looking for a gunman, they won't be looking for a compromised bolt."

"Then go to Maja," Lucas urged. "File a formal report. Put it on paper so it's their problem, not yours."

"I will," Karl lied. He knew the look Maja would give him, the same look she gave him this morning. To her, he was a man who memorised locker numbers because he was odd, not because he was right.

He left the pub shortly after, the cool night air hitting him like a physical splash of water. Instead of heading toward his apartment, he turned toward the water. The walk to the harbour was haunted by the rhythmic slapping of the lake against the stone piers. The moon was a mere sliver of silver, casting long, distorted shadows across the gravel paths.

Folkviljan swayed gently in its slip, its white hull gleaming like a bone in the darkness. Karl stood at

the chain-link fence, his breath misting in the air. He didn't move for ten minutes, his eyes scanning every inch of the deck, the rigging, the cleats.

Then he saw it. Near the base of the mast, tucked just under a mounting bracket, was a small square of orange electrical tape. It was tiny, barely the size of a postage stamp, but against the pristine white of the boat, it screamed. It hadn't been there during his morning walk. It was a marker. A sign that the work was done.

Karl pulled out his phone. He didn't use the flash; he adjusted the exposure manually, his hands rock-steady. *Click.* One photograph.

He pocketed the phone and turned away, his footsteps silent on the gravel as he faded back into the shadows of the town. He felt the weight of the secret pressing against his ribs.

He did not see the figure standing in the pitch-black maw of the maintenance shed twenty yards away. The man was dressed in charcoal grey, blending perfectly with the corrugated metal. His name was Jonasson. He watched Karl's retreating back with the detached interest of a scientist watching an insect crawl toward a trap.

Jonasson didn't reach for a weapon. Instead, he let a slow, thin smile spread across his face. The policeman was observant; that was a problem. But the policeman was also alone. And in Jonasson's world, being alone was the most fatal mistake of all.

3. A Sail in the Dark

Karl did not sleep. He lay beside Ida, listening to the rhythmic, comforting cadence of her breathing, but his mind was a cinema of static images. He kept replaying the sight of that sliver of orange tape. It was a marker; of that, he was certain. In the sailing world, tape was a vernacular for maintenance, a signal to a rigger that a shroud was frayed or a spreader needed tightening. But the *Folkviljan* was the mayor's vanity project, an immaculate vessel maintained by a professional skipper who polished the brass until it screamed. There was no reason for a crude piece of adhesive to mar its lines.

At 4:00 AM, the air in the apartment was thin and frigid. Karl dressed in the shadows: dark charcoal trousers, a black woollen jumper, and soft-soled boots. He scribbled a note for Ida, *Walk, back soon* and left it on the kitchen table weighted by his empty coffee mug.

The streets of Växjö were swallowed by a thick, milky mist that clung to the cobblestones. The black van was back, hunkered down two blocks from the mayor's residence like a predator in high grass. Karl walked past it with his chin tucked into his collar, his pace neither hurried nor hesitant. Through the peripheral haze of the tinted windows, he caught the faint, rhythmic pulse of a laptop's blue glow and the silhouette of a man in the rear, headset donned, leaning into the light. Karl didn't linger. He memorized the partial plate and kept moving.

The harbour gate was a formidable lattice of iron secured by a digital combination lock. Karl had noted the code months ago, not out of suspicion, but because his mind compulsively collected sequences. *1-9-9-2*. The year of the great harbour renovation. The buttons clicked softly under his touch, and the gate yielded with a heavy, oiled groan.

The *Folkviljan* sat at the end of the pier, its hull ghost-white against the dark water. It nudged against its rubber fenders with a rhythmic, mournful sound. Karl stepped onto the timber pontoon, his rubber soles absorbing the vibration of his footsteps. He reached the boarding ladder and froze, listening to the slap of the lake against the pylons. No lights. No movement. He hauled himself over the rail.

The deck was slick with a treacherous coat of morning dew. He moved toward the mast, his movements fluid and economical. The orange tape was there, a neon wound against the grey steel of the port-side shroud, the heavy cable that kept the mast upright against the wind's leverage. Karl knelt, pulling a small penlight from his pocket. He shielded the beam with his palm, allowing only a sliver of light to hit the metal.

There it was: a cut. It wasn't a jagged snap or a sign of wear. It was a precision incision, executed with a diamond-tipped saw, biting halfway through the high-tensile wire. To a casual observer standing on deck, the cable looked intact. But under the tension of a full sail and a gust of Swedish wind, the physics were inevitable. The shroud would fail, the mast would buckle, and the heavy aluminium spar would

come crashing down like a guillotine. The mayor, who insisted on helming the boat alone on his morning retreats, would be crushed or swept into the freezing depths of the lake.

Karl's heart didn't race; it slowed, his focus narrowing to the cold reality of the metal. He took out his phone, clicking the shutter with a muffled tap, documenting the sabotage from three distinct angles.

Then, the silence of the harbour was broken by a sound that didn't belong: the rhythmic, heavy tread of leather soles on the timber pontoon.

Karl stood and turned. A man was silhouetted against the amber glow of the distant streetlights. He was of medium height with an athletic, compact build, the kind of man who moved with a terrifying economy of motion. Karl didn't recognise the face, but he recognised the stance. The man stood with his weight balanced on the balls of his feet, his right hand hovering near the hem of his jacket.

"Nice night for a sail," the stranger said. His voice was melodic, educated, and utterly devoid of a local accent.

"The boat's locked," Karl replied, his voice a flat,

neutral rasp. “I’m just an insomniac with an interest in rigging.”

The man took a slow, deliberate step onto the deck. The boat tilted slightly under his weight. “You’re the constable. The quiet one. Blom, isn’t it?”

Karl felt the cold thread of the morning tighten into a garrotte. “Who’s asking?”

“Someone who thinks you should walk away, Karl. Right now. Forget the tape. Forget the cut. Go back to your apartment, drink your coffee, and find someone’s lost cat. That is your speed, isn’t it?”

“You seem remarkably well-informed for a tourist,” Karl said.

The man stepped closer, the light finally catching a jagged scar that ran from his ear to his jawline. He smiled, but his eyes remained as dead as stones. “I’m a friend of the future, Constable. And in that future, Sten Viklund has a tragic accident. If you interfere, you’ll find that silence isn’t always a comfortable habit. Sometimes, it’s something imposed on you. Permanently.”

The man turned and walked away without waiting for a response, his gait relaxed, as if he had just been

discussing the weather. Karl watched him go, his eyes tracking the man's left foot, which turned out slightly with every third step, an old hip or knee injury, likely sustained in the field. He filed the detail into the vault of his mind.

Karl did not return to Ida. He went to the station, the fluorescent lights flickering overhead as he sat at his desk. For the first time in a decade of service, he bypassed the protocols. He opened the encrypted file for the mayor's temporary security detail, the men he had seen earlier. Their credentials were a masterpiece of fiction. The photos were there, but the biometrics led to a digital black hole, a redacted void that screamed of state-level interference.

He sat in the dark, the only sound the hum of the vending machine in the hallway. He was a still man in a still room, but the internal gears were finally engaging. He was no longer just observing the world; he was stepping into its path.

He pulled his mobile out and dialled Detective Inspector Maja Forsell. She picked up on the fourth ring, her voice a gravelly snarl of interrupted sleep.

"Blom? It's five in the morning. Someone better be dead or on fire."

"Not yet," Karl said, his voice steadier than he felt. "But there is a plan to kill the mayor in approximately four hours. It's been professionalised, Maja. I need you at the harbour pier in sixty minutes. And don't come alone. Bring the duty magistrate and a forensic kit."

There was a long, heavy silence on the other end of the line. Karl could almost hear Maja's brain whirring, weighing the fact that the most boring man on the force had never asked for a favour in five years.

"You're certain about this?" she asked, the sleep gone from her voice.

"I have the photos of the shroud. They've sabotaged the *Folkviljan*."

"Fine," she snapped. "I'll be there. But if this is a mistake, Blom, you'll be directing traffic in the northern wastes until you retire."

"I'll see you at the pier," Karl said and hung up.

He looked at the image of the cut cable on his screen. The professionals had done everything right. They had used the correct tools, the right timing, and the perfect disguise. But they had made one fatal assumption: they thought that because Karl Blom

didn't speak, he didn't understand. They thought a quiet man was a blind man.

He had spent his life being underestimated, a shadow in the periphery of more important people. It was his greatest asset. And as the sun began to bleed over the horizon, Karl realised he wasn't just going to watch the van today. He was going to break the silence.

4. The Magistrate's Doubt

The harbour at five in the morning was a study in monochromatic gloom. The sky, the water, and the stained concrete docks merged into a single, muted canvas of charcoal and ash. A biting wind rolled off the lake, carrying the scent of diesel and dead weeds.

Karl Blom stood at the edge of the pier, his hands buried deep in the pockets of his regulation greatcoat. He was as still as the mooring posts. Beside him, Detective Inspector Maja Forsell shifted her weight impatiently, her boots crunching on a thin layer of frost. She had arrived with Magistrate Elof Lund, a man whose permanent expression suggested he had just bitten into a particularly sour apple. Lund carried a leather briefcase like a shield, his posture radiating a profound irritation at being summoned to a cold dock before the sun had even cleared the horizon.

"Constable Blom," Lund said, his breath blooming in the air like a cloud of white smoke. "Inspector Forsell has dragged me from my bed because you believe there is a credible threat to Mayor Viklund's life. A threat based, if I understand correctly, on a piece of electrical tape and a scratch you observed in the dark."

"It wasn't a scratch, sir," Karl said, his voice level and devoid of the deference Lund clearly expected. "It was a signature."

"You are aware," Lund continued, ignoring the correction, "that the Mayor is scheduled to sail at exactly seven o'clock this morning? He has a security detail of four armed officers, specialist protection provided by the Ministry. It is quite literally the most secure vessel in the Baltic today."

"Those officers aren't real," Karl said.

Lund stopped mid-scoff. "I beg your pardon?"

"Their identities are sophisticated fabrications," Karl explained, eyes fixed on the silhouette of the Mayor's yacht, the *Folkviljan*. "I spent the night cross-referencing their service numbers. The files are ghost entries, flagged at a national level with

high-level clearance. Someone didn't just hire muscle; they built a bureaucratic fortress around them."

Lund glanced at Maja, his skepticism finally wavering. She gave a small, grim nod. "He's right, Elof. I had the duty sergeant run a deep-trace on the credentials. The access codes used to create those profiles originated from a terminal in Stockholm that hasn't been used since 2022. It's a ghost operation."

Lund's sour expression deepened into a mask of genuine concern. "Even so, that's circumstantial. High-level security often uses 'black' identities for plausible deniability."

"The cut cable is not circumstantial," Karl said.

He turned and led them down the swaying pontoon toward the *Folkviljan*. The boat was a sleek, aggressive beauty of carbon fibre and polished teak. In the growing, grey light, Karl pointed to the main shroud, the heavy steel cable that held the mast upright against the immense pressure of the wind. Even Lund, who knew more about maritime law than actual boats, could see the damage.

Hidden beneath a clever wrap of weathered tape was a clean, diagonal incision. Half the steel strands had been severed with surgical precision.

Maja reached out, touching the cold metal with a gloved finger. “This wouldn’t snap at the dock,” she whispered. “But the Mayor likes to sail hard. He’s known for ‘hiking out’ in heavy weather. The moment he catches a real gust, the tension would finish what the saw started. The mast would come down like a guillotine. They’d find him tangled in the rigging in the water, and every maritime expert in Sweden would call it a tragic equipment failure.”

“Who benefits from a dead Mayor?” Lund asked, his voice finally losing its edge of condescension.

Karl had been piecing the puzzle together since the moment he saw the black van. “Mayor Viklund was about to be appointed to the National Security Council. He’s been quietly investigating a massive defence procurement scandal. Two companies, one domestic, one a foreign conglomerate bid on the new naval stealth contract. The foreign company lost, despite a bid that was significantly lower. Questions were being asked about kickbacks. If Viklund takes that seat in Stockholm, he becomes the lead investigator.”

Maja’s eyes narrowed, her sharp mind catching up. “You read the procurement reports? Those are four hundred pages of technical jargon and accounting.”

“I’m a constable,” Karl said simply. “I have a lot of time for reading.”

Lund folded his arms, looking out at the dark water. “It’s a compelling theory, Blom. But legally, we are in a quagmire. If we delay the sail, the culprits vanish. If we arrest these ‘fake’ officers, they’ll claim they are part of a classified exercise and their lawyers will have them out by lunch. We have no link to the architect of this.”

“Then we let him sail,” Karl said.

Maja whirled on him. “Excuse me? You want to watch him drown?”

“No,” Karl said, his grey eyes finally meeting hers. “We replace the cut cable now. We have two hours. We use a reinforced shroud from the harbour master’s stores. We put our own people on the water, disguised as pleasure-seekers, fishermen, harbour maintenance. And we watch. The man who cut that cable, the one I saw yesterday, will want to witness the result. He’ll be perched somewhere with a line of sight. When the mast doesn’t fall, he will panic. He will wonder if he didn’t cut deep enough, or if he’s been betrayed. He will make contact with his handlers to explain the failure. That is when we trace the signal.”

The silence that followed was broken only by the rhythmic *slap-slap* of the tide against the hull. Lund looked at Karl as if seeing him for the very first time. "It's incredibly risky. If your reinforced cable fails, or if they have a secondary plan..."

"It's the only way to catch the man who ordered it," Karl said. "I'm not interested in the mechanic. I want the architect."

Maja stepped closer, placing a hand on Karl's shoulder. She felt the surprising solidity of him, the stillness that she had once mistaken for passivity. "You're not a detective, Blom. You're supposed to be filing parking tickets and finding lost dogs."

"No," he said. "I'm the man who watches."

And for the first time, Maja saw something in his pale eyes that chilled her more than the morning mist. It wasn't the fiery ambition of a young officer looking for a promotion, nor was it the fear of a man out of his depth. It was a cold, patient hunger for the truth, a predatory clarity.

She sighed, the decision made. "I'll get the rigging crew from the Coast Guard. We'll tell them it's a drill. Lund, you call the Mayor. Tell him there's a minor

maintenance issue with the winches, but he's cleared to sail by seven. Don't mention the cut. Not a word."

Lund hesitated, then pulled his phone from his pocket, his thumb hovering over the screen. "If this goes wrong, Forsell, it's our heads."

"Then let's make sure it doesn't," she snapped.

Karl stood alone on the pontoon as they hurried away. Somewhere in a rented room overlooking the water, the man he knew as Jonasson was likely waking up, checking his binoculars, and reviewing a plan he thought was perfect. Jonasson believed he had accounted for every variable: the wind speed, the security detail, the structural integrity of steel.

He had not accounted for the man nobody noticed.

Karl watched the sun finally break the horizon, a sliver of gold bleeding into the grey. He didn't move. He didn't blink. He simply waited.

5. The Morning of the Hunt

By six-thirty in the morning, the Växjö harbour had been transformed into a silent, meticulously dressed stage. To a casual observer, it was merely the start of another crisp Swedish day, but to Karl, every movement was a line of dialogue in a play that was actually a trap.

The water was a sheet of hammered pewter, disturbed only by the rhythmic bobbing of two fishing trawlers that had drifted into position near the mouth of the bay. They looked authentic enough, rust-streaked hulls and tangled nets but their holds did not smell of brine and scale. Instead, they contained six members of the regional task force, armed with suppressed carbines that Maja had secured through a combination of professional leverage and

sheer intimidation. Tucked behind the jagged spine of the eastern breakwater, a small black inflatable idled. Its engine was a mere whisper against the lapping waves, piloted by Elin, a sharpshooter whose stillness rivalled Karl's own. Karl had noted, with his usual detached precision, that she shared a name with Lucas's daughter; a coincidence he filed away as a statistical curiosity.

Karl had claimed the high ground. He stood atop the corrugated metal roof of a harbour maintenance shed, disguised in oil-stained grey coveralls and a salt-crusted cap. Through his binoculars, the world was a grid of potential threats. He could see the sway of the pontoons, the glass-and-timber glint of the mayor's residence on the heights, and the snaking public walkway where the shadows were still long and deep.

At six-forty-five, Mayor Sten Viklund emerged. Even at this distance, his silver hair caught the light like a beacon. He walked with the practiced, effortless gait of a man who believed the world was fundamentally built for his convenience. Yet, as he approached the pier, Karl noticed a tell: a slight rigidity in the shoulders, a way of looking at his watch that felt more like a countdown than a check of the time.

The two security officers, the men Karl knew only as "Nilsson" and "Berg" met him at the gate. They exchanged handshakes that looked choreographed, a pantomime of professional greeting.

"They're too still," Karl whispered into his collar mic, his voice barely a vibration.

"Explain," Maja's voice crackled in his earpiece, strained with caffeine and adrenaline.

"Real protection officers have an itch," Karl replied, his eyes fixed on the lenses. "They check their blind spots. They adjust their holsters. They shift their weight to stay limber. These two are statues. They aren't guarding him; they're delivering him."

Viklund boarded *Folkviljan*. The boat was a masterpiece of polished teak and stainless steel. Karl tracked the vessel as it cast off, his gaze lingering on the shroud he had surreptitiously inspected the day before. The repair was invisible to the naked eye, the high-tensile wire gleaming dully. It was the strongest point on the boat, though the saboteurs believed it to be the weakest.

The engine purred, a low-frequency thrum that vibrated through the soles of Karl's boots. The sails

remained furled, white cocoons against the mast, as the boat began its slow procession toward open water.

Karl began a slow sweep of the shoreline. A jogger in neon yellow thudded past. An elderly man threw a tennis ball for a golden retriever. Then, Karl stopped. On the public pier, a man stood leaning against a railing. He wore a neutral grey jacket and held a Canon camera with a 400mm telephoto lens, heavy glass, expensive.

"Maja. Public pier. Target male, fifties, grey jacket. He's got a long lens pointed at the boat, but his posture is wrong."

"Wrong how, Blom?"

"He's not checking his settings. He's not compensating for the shifting light on the water. He's just tracking the mast. He's waiting for a mechanical failure."

"I see him," Maja confirmed. "Elin, do you have a visual from the water?"

"Affirmative," the sharpshooter's voice was cool, professional. "I have him in the crosshairs. He's steady as a rock. He's waiting for the 'accident.'"

“Don’t engage,” Karl commanded, his voice gaining a rare edge of authority. “Let him watch. He’s the spotter, not the mechanic. We need to see what he does when the plan fails.”

The boat reached the mouth of the harbour, hitting the first of the offshore swells. The mayor killed the engine. The silence that followed was heavy, broken only by the distant crying of gulls. Slowly, the mainsail began to rise, catching a sharp gust of Baltic wind. The canvas snapped tight with a sound like a gunshot.

Karl held his breath. The mast groaned under the sudden tension. The shroud, the intended point of failure, tightened until it was a singing wire of steel. The mast stayed true. The boat heeled over gracefully, slicing through the chop.

Karl swung his binoculars back to the man on the pier. The transformation was instantaneous. The man’s shoulders slumped. The heavy camera lowered, forgotten against his chest. The disappointment was visible even from three hundred yards away. The man didn’t linger; he reached into his pocket and pulled out a mobile phone.

"Maja, the spotter is texting. He's calling it in. Can we intercept the signal?"

"Telecom is on it, but the encryption will take time. Don't let him vanish, Karl."

The man turned and began walking briskly toward the car park, his pace doubling. Karl didn't think; he simply moved. He descended the maintenance ladder with a fluidity that would have surprised his colleagues. His boots hit the concrete, and for the first time in his career, Karl Blom ran.

He moved like a shadow through the gaps between the parked cars, cutting off the man's path just as he reached a silver Volvo. Karl didn't shout. He didn't draw his weapon. He simply appeared, reaching out with a grip that was as sudden and unyielding as a vice, catching the man by the elbow.

"Excuse me, sir," Karl said, his voice terrifyingly calm. "I need to see your identification."

The man spun around. His face was the kind of face Karl usually possessed—utterly forgettable. But the eyes were a deep, predatory brown, flickering with a cold, analytical intelligence.

“Constable,” the man said, his voice smooth and accented with the clipped tones of Stockholm’s elite. “You’re interrupting a hobby. I’m a birdwatcher.”

“The only birds in this harbour are gulls, and they don’t require a four-hundred-millimetre lens to identify,” Karl said, his grip tightening. “You weren’t watching the birds. You were watching *Folkviljan*. You were waiting for the mast to snap and the mayor to be swept overboard in a tragic maritime accident. It didn’t happen. That must be quite a setback for your employers.”

The man’s lip twitched, a microscopic fracture in his mask. “I haven’t the slightest idea what you’re talking about. You’re harassing a private citizen.”

“Your handler knows exactly what I’m talking about,” Karl countered. “The one you just messaged. The one who is currently being traced by the Security Service. You’re not a birdwatcher. You’re a witness to a failed conspiracy.”

The man’s composure finally cracked. A flicker of genuine, cold fear darted across his features as he realised he wasn’t dealing with a simple beat cop. He looked at Karl—really looked at him and saw the

grey eyes that absorbed everything and gave nothing back.

"You can remain silent," Karl said, beginning the formal caution in a tone as dry as autumn leaves. "But anything you do say may be given in evidence."

The man let out a short, hollow laugh. "You're a local constable, Blom. You're a footnote. You have no jurisdiction over the people I work for."

"That's where you're mistaken," a new voice barked. Maja Forsell strode into the car park, her badge glinting in the morning sun. Her hand was resting on the grip of her sidearm, her eyes burning with a fierce, triumphant light. "Because I'm a Detective Inspector, and I'm arresting you on suspicion of conspiracy to commit murder. Turn around. Now."

The man's laughter died instantly. Karl felt the tension leave the man's arm as he surrendered to the inevitable. The handcuffs clicked shut with a finality that echoed across the quiet car park.

Miles away, in a darkened room overlooking a different stretch of water, a man known to very few as Jonasson watched the entire scene play out on a high-definition live feed. He watched as the 'unre-

markable' constable handed the prisoner over. He zoomed in on Karl Blom's face, memorising the birch-bark hair and the pale, light-drinking eyes.

"The silent one," Jonasson whispered to the empty room. "I didn't account for the silent one."

He closed the laptop, the screen's glow fading to black. He would not make that mistake a second time.

6. The Interrogation

The interview room at Växjö police station was a masterclass in psychological attrition. The walls were a shade of beige that seemed designed to drain the soul, windowless and smelling faintly of industrial bleach and old sweat. The air conditioning hummed with a low-frequency thrum that set the teeth on edge. In the centre of this sterile box sat the man from the pier. According to his passport, he was Anders Holmgren, but to Karl, he was simply a sequence of movements that didn't quite scan.

Holmgren sat with the easy, practiced posture of a man who had spent a significant portion of his life on the wrong side of a reinforced door. He didn't fidget. He didn't sweat. Beside him, his lawyer, a woman with a face as sharp as a scalpel and a suit that cost more than Karl's car, maintained a posture of bored professional indignation. She had advised silence. Holmgren, a good student, had obliged.

Maja Forsell was on her third cup of sludge-like coffee, the ceramic mug clattering rhythmically against the metal table. Karl sat in the far corner, his notebook balanced on his knee, his pen poised but motionless. He was a piece of the furniture, a shadow cast by the harsh overhead fluorescent lights. This was his role: the silent observer, the human recording device that suspects eventually forgot was even in the room.

"Mr Holmgren," Maja began, her voice raspy from caffeine and irritation. "You claim to be a freelance photographer. A romantic of the lens. Yet your bank records show no commissions for six months, and your portfolio is as thin as this coffee. And yet, there you were this morning, perched on the harbour wall with a 400mm lens, focused exclusively on the mayor's sailboat. Do you find the *Folkviljan* particularly photogenic, or is it just the way the light hits the hull?"

Holmgren offered a thin, practiced smile. "I'm working on a personal project, Inspector. A study on maritime security and the aesthetics of power. The mayor's boat is a magnificent example of Swedish craftsmanship. Is it a crime to admire fine lines in the morning sun?"

"And the frantic texting?" Maja leaned in, her chair groaning. "You sent an encrypted message the exact second the boat failed to capsize. A very specific moment to check in with the office, wouldn't you say?"

"I texted my wife," Holmgren said, his tone dripping with faux-sincerity. "I wanted to tell her I'd be late for breakfast. I'm a devoted husband, despite what my lack of commissions might suggest."

The lawyer gave a sharp, approving nod, tapping her gold pen on the table. Maja glanced back at Karl. He gave the smallest, almost imperceptible shake of his head. *Not yet. Let him feel the weight of his own lies first.*

"Let's talk about the *Folkviljan*'s rigging," Maja continued, pivoting. "The forestay cable didn't just snap. It was a precision incision, made with a carbide rotary blade. Clean. Surgical. Now, interestingly enough, your camera bag, which we've taken the liberty of voucherising, contains a professional-grade multitool with a carbide attachment. We've sent it for forensic trace analysis. If we find even a microscopic filing of that stainless steel alloy on your blade, the narrative changes quite drastically."

Holmgren's smile remained, but Karl noticed his

left hand. His index finger tapped once, twice, against the underside of the table. A tell. A tiny fracture in the granite facade. Anxiety was beginning to seep through the cracks.

"I'm a photographer," Holmgren repeated, his voice a fraction tighter. "I carry tools for adjusting tripods and equipment. It's a standard piece of kit. Carrying a tool isn't a crime in this country, is it?"

"No," Maja said, her voice dropping to a dangerous growl. "But attempted murder is. And that's where we're headed."

The lawyer stood abruptly, her chair screeching against the floor. "Inspector, this is posturing. Unless you have concrete physical evidence linking my client to the sabotage of the vessel, this interview is over. We aren't here to discuss tool kits and hypothetical filings."

Maja looked at Karl again. This time, he didn't shake his head. He stood up.

The movement was slow, deliberate. He walked to the table with the quiet grace of a predator that knew the prey was already caught. He didn't look at the lawyer. He looked directly at Holmgren. Karl

reached into a folder and placed a single high-resolution photograph on the table.

It wasn't a picture of the cut cable. It wasn't the orange tape from the crime scene. It was a grainy, night-vision shot of Holmgren himself, standing outside the harbour gate at 2:00 AM, two nights prior. The timestamp glowed in the corner like a countdown.

"That's from a hidden security camera you didn't know existed," Karl said. His voice was soft, devoid of Maja's aggression. It was almost gentle, the voice of a doctor delivering a terminal diagnosis. "You're not a birdwatcher, Mr Holmgren. You're not a maritime artist. You're a spotter. You were there the night the cable was cut, acting as the eyes for the man with the blade. You were there this morning to document the success of the hit. But the mast held. The mayor is alive. And you are sitting in a beige room with a very short future."

Holmgren stared at the photo. The tapping finger stopped.

"You're not the architect," Karl continued, leaning closer until he could smell the stale tobacco on Holmgren's breath. "You're a tool. And tools are re-

placeable. They're discarded when they break or get blunt. The man who actually cut that cable, the mechanic, he's already gone. He's halfway to the border while you sit here playing the loyal soldier. He won't come for you. He won't pay your legal fees when this moves to a national security tribunal. He'll let you rot for twenty years. Attempted murder with terrorist intent carries a very long shadow."

Holmgren's composure didn't just crack; it suffered a total structural collapse. His shoulders slumped, the arrogance draining out of him until he looked smaller, older. His eyes began to water, darting toward his lawyer. She looked at the photograph, then at her client, and gave a single, defeated nod. The game was up.

"His name is Jonasson," Holmgren whispered, his voice cracking. "But that's... that's an alias. No one knows his real name. He's ex-military. Swedish Special Forces, or something similar. He doesn't work for a political party. He works for a private intelligence firm out of Riga. They handle 'deniable operations.' The mayor wasn't a political target to them; he was a contract. Someone very high up wanted him removed from the board."

Maja leaned forward, the scent of blood in the water. “Who? Who is the client?”

“I don’t know!” Holmgren insisted, his voice rising in panic. “Jonasson didn’t tell me. He never tells anyone more than they need to know for the specific task. I was just the lookout.” He looked at Karl, a genuine flicker of fear in his eyes. “You were right. He didn’t account for someone like you. He thought the local police were just... bureaucrats. But he’ll know now. Jonasson doesn’t leave loose ends, Mr Blom. He’ll come to tidy this up.”

Karl stood up straight, smoothing the front of his jacket. His face remained an unreadable mask of birch and grey light, betraying nothing of the sudden chill in his blood. Jonasson. Riga. A private intelligence firm with deep pockets and a high-level client.

The “still man” had found his thread. It was no longer a curious observation or a daily habit; it was a chain, and it was tightening. He turned to leave the room, his mind already cataloguing the black van, the security men, and the precision of the cut. He had no intention of letting go. Not until the silence was earned.

7. The Architect's Shadow

The farmhouse was a skeletal structure of weathered timber and grey stone, hunkered down against the damp Växjö countryside like a beast in hiding. Inside, the air tasted of stagnant dust and the metallic tang of gun oil. Jonasson sat at a scarred pine table, the singular pool of light from a flickering overhead bulb casting long, jagged shadows against the cellar door.

He was not a man built for panic. To Jonasson, panic was a biological failure, a luxury for amateurs who hadn't made peace with the precarious nature of their trade. He had watched Holmgren's arrest from the shadowed mouth of an alleyway, his pulse never rising above a steady sixty beats per minute. He had seen the zip-ties bite into Holmgren's wrists and simply turned away, walking with the unhurried gait of a man heading home from a long shift.

The grey Volvo with diplomatic plates, stolen from a consulate in Stockholm and fitted with cloned tags—sat idling in the farmhouse drive. It was his lifeline, yet he treated it with the same cold indifference he showed his weapons.

He opened his laptop. The blue light of the screen reflected in his eyes, hard and flat as polished flint. The secure chat interface blinked, a digital void waiting for his report. He typed with a heavy, rhythmic cadence:

HOLMGREN COMPROMISED. MAYOR ALIVE. LOCAL CONSTABLE INTERFERED. IDENTIFIED AS KARL BLOM, VÄXJÖ POLICE. REQUEST PERMISSION TO ELIMINATE.

He waited. Outside, the wind rattled the loose corrugated iron of the barn. A crow landed on the windowsill, its black eye fixed on the glass, watching him. The reply scrolled across the screen in less than a minute, the text stark and uncompromising:

DENIED. BLOM IS A VARIABLE, NOT A TARGET. EXTRACT TO RIGA IMMEDIATELY. NEW ASSIGNMENT AWAITS.

Jonasson's fingers hovered over the keys, the

knuckles white. *Denied.* The word sat in his gut like lead. A six-month operation, months of surveillance, sub-contracting, and careful positioning—had been dismantled by a man who looked like he belonged behind a library desk. He felt the rare, hot itch of frustration.

BLOM IS DANGEROUS, he typed back, his speed increasing. **HE SEES WHAT OTHERS MISS. HE IS ALREADY TRACING THE HARBOUR LOCKS. IF HE IS LEFT ACTIVE, THE ENTIRE SOUTHERN NETWORK IS AT RISK.**

The response was instantaneous, as if the person on the other end had anticipated his defiance:

THAT IS PRECISELY WHY HE IS NOT TO BE TOUCHED. YOU ARE TO VACATE THE SAFE HOUSE WITHIN TEN MINUTES. YOU HAVE YOUR ORDERS. DO NOT BECOME A LIABILITY, JONASSON.

The laptop lid snapped shut with a sound like a pistol shot. Jonasson stood, his chair screeching against the floorboards. He was not accustomed to being overruled, especially not when his instincts, honed in the grimier corners of Eastern Europe, were screaming that a threat was being ignored.

But he was, above all else, a professional. He moved through the farmhouse with practiced economy. In the cellar, he bypassed the heavier hardware, selecting only a silenced 9mm and three stacks of Euros. He swapped his Swedish driver's licence for a Finnish passport that had been aged to perfection.

At the cast-iron stove, he fed his notes into the embers. He watched the diagrams of the Mayor's lakeside estate and the surveillance logs of the harbour curl into black ash. He thought of the black van, the satellite antenna, and the precision with which the operation had been moving until Karl Blom stepped into the light.

He climbed back into the Volvo and drove toward the coast, the tyres crunching on the gravel track. The Swedish landscape blurred into a smear of dark greens and greys. As the miles fell away, his mind remained trapped in the morning's events.

He replayed the image of the constable on the shed roof. Most policemen were noisy; they announced their presence with heavy boots and authoritative shouts. Blom had been different. He had moved with a disturbing, feline grace, silent, precise, unhurried. When he had spoken to Holmgren, there had been no theatrical bravado. He hadn't sounded like a civ-

il servant performing a duty; he had sounded like a hunter who had already accounted for every possible escape route.

Jonasson had encountered men like that before, in the forests outside Minsk and the backstreets of Belgrade. Quiet men. Observant men. The kind of men who didn't care about the glory of the arrest, only the completion of the task. They were the most dangerous variable in any equation because they never announced themselves. They simply appeared at the exact moment the tension was highest, and by their mere presence, the outcome changed irrevocably.

The coast neared. The salt air began to seep through the vents, cold and sharp. In the distance, the lights of a small fishing pier flickered. A boat would be waiting in the darkness, a silent vessel to carry him into international waters. By dawn, the spires of Riga would be on the horizon.

He slowed the car as he reached the harbour's edge, his eyes scanning the perimeter. His orders were clear: extract and move on. But Jonasson knew that variables left unchecked had a habit of becoming catastrophes.

He reached into the glove box and pulled out a small, leather-bound notebook. On the first clean page, in neat, cramped handwriting, he wrote a single name: *Karl Blom.* Below it, he noted the details: *Växjö PD. Grey eyes. Birch hair. High situational awareness. Do not underestimate.*

He closed the book and tucked it into his inner pocket, right against his ribs. He would obey the order to retreat. He would take the new assignment in Riga. But he would keep this file open. He would watch from the shadows of the Baltic, waiting to see if the hunter in the blue-grey jacket followed the scent.

If Karl Blom ever crossed his path again, Jonasson wouldn't bother with the secure chat. He wouldn't ask for permission. He would simply end the variable before it could ruin the next equation.

He stepped out of the car, locked it, and tossed the keys into the black water of the Baltic. The silence of the night swallowed the splash, and Jonasson vanished into the dark.

8. The Quiet Apartment

The apartment was filled with the heavy, salt-sweet aroma of fish stew, a scent that usually acted as an anchor for Karl after a long shift. Tonight, the air felt different. Ida had lit a single taper candle, its flame dancing in the slight draught from the window, casting long, flickering shadows against the spines of his books. She sat at the small table, her posture poised between relief and a deep, simmering anxiety.

She did not ask why he was late. She did not ask about the blood on his cuff or the frantic, siren-filled reports that had been broadcasting on a loop since four in the afternoon. She simply watched him. Karl moved with his usual economy of motion, hanging

his blue-grey jacket on the brass hook and smoothing the Växjö patch. But as he pulled out his chair, the wood scraping against the floor sounded louder than usual, a sharp punctuation mark in the quiet.

"You look different," Ida said, her voice barely a whisper.

Karl dipped his spoon into the stew, the steam warming his face. "Different how?"

"Lighter," she replied, leaning forward into the circle of candlelight. "Like a spring that's been wound too tight for years has finally begun to uncoil. There's a clarity in your eyes that's… frightening, Karl."

He chewed slowly, the flavours of leek and saffron grounding him. He looked at her, really looked at her and the weight of his own silence felt suddenly cumbersome. "I caught someone today. A man who intended to kill the mayor at the harbour. He was disguised as a technician."

Ida set her spoon down with a muffled *clink*. "I know. It's on every news channel from here to Stockholm. They're showing that grainy mobile phone footage of you tackling him near the water. They're calling you a hero, Karl. The 'Shadow of Växjö.'"

"I'm not a hero, Ida. I'm a man who saw a cable that shouldn't have been frayed and a man who didn't know how to hold a wrench."

"No," she agreed, her gaze unwavering. "You're a man who did his job. But we both know this didn't end at the pier. The man you caught, he's just a thread, isn't he? And you're going to pull it until the whole thing unravels."

It wasn't a question; it was an observation of his soul. Karl looked at her, seeing the softness of her face in the amber light and the way her hands were clasped tightly to stop them from trembling. She wasn't afraid of the violence he might encounter; she was afraid of the distance it would put between them.

"I have to see it through," he said, his voice dropping into a lower register. "The man's name is Jonasson. He's ex-special forces, SOG. He doesn't work for a cause; he works for a private firm that treats political assassination like a line-item on a budget. If I stop now, if I let the bureaucracy bury this as an isolated incident, he'll just reset. He'll find another angle, another city, another victim. And next time, there might not be anyone standing there watching the shadows."

Ida reached across the table, her warm fingers sliding over his bruised knuckles. The contact was electric, a reminder of the world outside the station's cold files.

"Then don't stop," she said, her voice gaining a sudden, fierce strength. "But promise me one thing, Karl Blom."

"Anything."

"Don't become the silence," she urged. "Don't disappear into this hunt so deeply that you forget how to come back. You're still the man who walks me to the hospital gates. You're still the man who sits through Lucas's endless, rambling stories about Elin just because you know he needs to be heard. You noticed the black van because you care about this street, not just because you're a hunter. That's your strength. Not the watching ...the living."

He held her hand for a long moment, the heat of her palm seeping into his skin. The impulse to withdraw, to keep his mission internal and solitary, flickered and died. "I promise," he said.

Later that night, the apartment was silent, but the stillness had shifted. It was no longer the passive still-

ness of a man observing a street; it was the vibrating, kinetic stillness of a predator waiting for dawn. Karl lay in the dark, staring at the ceiling where the moonlight traced silver patterns.

The day's events replayed in his mind like a high-definition reel. He had the name: Jonasson. He had the destination: a safe house in Riga, identified from an encrypted burner phone recovered at the scene. And he had the firm, *Aegis Sentinel,* a private intelligence outfit that operated in the grey spaces between international law.

But more than that, he realized he was no longer a solitary figure on a peninsula of order.

Maja Forsell had stayed at her desk long after her shift ended, her abrasive voice softened by a rare, grim respect as she began calling in every favour she owed within the Swedish Security Service. "If you're going down this rabbit hole, Blom," she'd said, "I'm holding the rope."

He had Magistrate Lund, the normally timid man who had spent the evening uncovering a labyrinth of shell companies in Cyprus that funded the fake security detail at the mayor's house.

And then there was Lucas. A simple text had arrived an hour ago, glowing bright in the dark bedroom: *Whatever you need, Karl. I've got the old delivery van gassed up and a reciprocating saw in the back. Just say the word.*

Karl felt a muscle move in his cheek, a rare, genuine smile. For years, his invisibility had been his greatest asset, but he realized now that being seen by the right people was a different kind of power.

He closed his eyes, the image of the black van at the junction fading, replaced by the map of a city he was about to dismantle. He wasn't just watching anymore. He was moving.

Tomorrow, the hunt would begin in earnest, and for the first time in his life, Karl Blom didn't care if they saw him coming.

9. Riga

The flight to Riga was a brief, jarring leap across the Baltic Sea, lasting just over an hour. Karl sat in a window seat, watching the Swedish coastline dissolve into a grey smudge beneath a ceiling of heavy clouds. His constable's uniform, his skin, for all intents and purposes, had been replaced by a charcoal-grey suit. Ida had spent three hours in the department store insisting on the cut, claiming it made him look like a "man with a destination." To Karl, it was simply a more expensive camouflage.

He looked like a junior trade attaché or perhaps a mid-level bureaucrat from the Ministry of Justice. That was the point. Maja Forsell had burned through a decade's worth of professional favours to secure him a temporary attachment to the Swedish Security Service's Baltic desk. His official cover was that of a liaison officer, a paper-pusher sent to facilitate "inter-agency cooperation." His real mission was singular: find Jonasson.

The private intelligence firm at the centre of the web was called *Akmens Grupa*, Stone Group. Officially, their glossy brochures spoke of maritime security, risk assessment, and "logistical stability" in the Baltic region. Unofficially, in the windowless rooms of Stockholm's intelligence hubs, they were known as a "black site" for deniable operations. They were the cleaners, the ghosts, and the enforcers for a client list that included oligarchs with fading empires and corporations that viewed the law as a negotiable suggestion.

Karl had spent the flight memorising the dossier until the words felt etched into his retinas. *Akmens Grupa* was the kingdom of Juris Kalniņš, a man who had survived the collapse of the Soviet Union by treating the KGB's secrets as startup capital. At sixty-two, Kalniņš was a silver-haired titan of industry who lived in a sprawling, neo-classical mansion on the outskirts of Riga. He drove a black Mercedes S-Class and employed exactly seventy-three people.

One of them was Jonasson.

The plane touched down with a dull thud on the Riga tarmac. Karl moved through passport control with the practiced anonymity that was his greatest gift. The border guard barely glanced at his face, his

eyes sliding over Karl's unremarkable features as if they were water on glass. The cover identity held.

A taxi took him into the heart of the Old Town, a labyrinth of winding cobblestone streets, medieval spires, and the faint, metallic scent of the Daugava River. His hotel room was small and smelled of lavender and floor wax. It faced a narrow interior courtyard where a single stunted tree fought for sunlight. Karl did not unpack. He did not even sit on the bed. Instead, he pulled a chair to the window, dimmed the lights, and watched the shadows move below.

Old habits were the only things he truly owned.

At 8:00 PM, the city began to breathe with a different rhythm. Karl stepped out into the cool evening air, his hands deep in his coat pockets. He walked with a purposeful, yet unremarkable gait toward a bar called *Vecais Zēns* The Old Boy. It was tucked away in a basement, a subterranean cavern of dark timber, thick tobacco smoke, and the low, guttural murmur of Latvian. It was a place for men who had killed before lunch and expected to do so again before dawn.

Karl ordered a local beer and retreated to a corner table, his back against the cold stone wall. A Security

Service contact had whispered that Jonasson was a creature of habit, he drank here when he was "between assignments." Not often, but enough to create a pattern.

Karl waited. One hour bled into two. The beer turned flat and lukewarm, a bitter amber pool in the glass. He ordered another, sip-counting the minutes. The bar grew louder, then quieter, as the casual drinkers departed, leaving only the professionals and the desperate.

At 11:15 PM, the heavy oak door creaked open. Karl did not look up. He didn't need to. He watched the reflection in the polished glass of a framed spirit advertisement behind the bar.

A man entered. Medium height. Athletic build. He walked with a slight outward turn of his left foot—a vestige of an old injury or perhaps a specific style of combat training. It was the same man who had confronted him on the rain-slicked pontoon in Växjö.

Jonasson.

Karl's pulse remained a steady, rhythmic thrum. His breathing didn't hitch. He remained as still as a piece of the furniture, a shadow among shadows.

Jonasson ordered a whiskey, neat, and stood at the bar rather than taking a seat. He scanned the room with the practiced, predatory sweep of a man looking for an exit or an ambush. His eyes passed over Karl without a flicker of recognition. Why would they? To Jonasson, Karl was just another grey suit in a grey corner, a man who had already been forgotten before the door had even finished swinging shut.

Jonasson drank the whiskey in three measured swallows. He checked his phone, then his watch. He was a man operating on a timetable.

Karl waited, his focus sharpening until the rest of the room was a blur.

At 11:45 PM, a second man entered. He was tall and painfully thin, with a jagged scar that bisected his jawline like a lightning bolt. He didn't order a drink. He slid onto the stool next to Jonasson and began to speak in low, urgent Latvian. Karl couldn't translate the words, but the body language was a universal dialect. The scarred man was twitchy, his fingers drumming a frantic tattoo on the bar top. Jonasson, by contrast, was a monolith. He wasn't discussing; he was dictating. He was giving orders.

Under the table, Karl slipped his phone from his pocket. With a steady hand, he angled the lens. The shutter sound had been silenced weeks ago. He took a single, high-resolution photograph: the predator and his messenger, framed by the amber glow of the bar lamps.

Then, Karl did something that went against every instinct of his quiet life. He stood up.

He walked toward the bar, his movements loose and seemingly aimless. He stepped into the space directly next to Jonasson and caught the bartender's eye.

"Another, please," Karl said in English, his voice pitched to the perfect level of a tired tourist.

Up close, the air around Jonasson changed. He smelled of high-grade gun oil, expensive tobacco, and the biting cold of the Riga night. Jonasson's eyes flicked toward Karl, a sharp, piercing grey that reminded Karl of his own, yet lacked the empathy. For a heartbeat, the world narrowed to the few inches between them. Jonasson's gaze lingered on Karl's jaw, then slid away, dismissed. No recognition. To the wolf, the sheep is only relevant when it's in the way.

Karl paid for his beer with a fumbled handful of Euros, took a single sip, and left it on the bar.

Outside, he walked three blocks at a brisk pace, his heart finally beginning to hammer against his ribs. He ducked into a narrow, rubbish-strewn alleyway and leaned his back against the cold brick. He took a deep breath, the damp air filling his lungs.

His hands were steady. His mind, usually a placid lake, was now a racing engine.

He had the photograph. He had the location. He had the pattern. But Jonasson was a ghost who only appeared when he chose to. To catch a ghost, you couldn't just watch from the shadows.

He needed bait. And he knew exactly who the bait had to be.

10. The Bait

The epiphany arrived at three o'clock in the morning, born in the sterile, flickering shadows of a budget hotel room. Karl lay perfectly still, staring at a water stain on the ceiling that looked vaguely like the coastline of Gotland. He didn't toss or turn; he simply processed.

Jonasson was not a man moved by sentiment or the desperate pleas of the righteous. He was a creature of logistics and contractual obligations, a professional. To draw a predator from its thicket, one didn't offer a truce; one threatened its territory. Karl needed to jeopardise something Jonasson valued more than his own skin, his reputation for delivery.

The Akmens Grupa dossier, which Karl had committed to his internal archives, contained a list of active maritime contracts. Most were strings of encrypted alphanumeric gibberish, but one had been

highlighted in a sharp, digital amber by Swedish Intelligence. A shipment of advanced radar components was due to transit from Gothenburg to a private terminal in Estonia. Nominally civilian, the hardware was dual-use, possessing the high-frequency capabilities required for military-grade surveillance. It was slated for departure in seventy-two hours.

Karl reached for the burner phone on the bedside table. In Sweden, it was four in the morning. Maja Forsell answered on the first ring, her voice already sharp with the caffeine of a woman who didn't know how to sleep.

"You're alive," she said, though it sounded more like an accusation than a relief.

"Barely," Karl replied, his voice a dry rasp in the quiet room. "Listen to me. Akmens Grupa is providing the security layer for a radar shipment out of Gothenburg. It's the spine of their current quarterly contract. If that shipment is compromised, Jonasson cannot delegate. He will have to respond personally to maintain the client's confidence. He'll come out of hiding."

There was a muffled sound on the other end, Maja shifting in her chair, likely rubbing her temples. "In-

tercept it how, Blom? We're a local precinct, not the SBS. We have zero jurisdiction in international waters and the Coast Guard won't move on a 'hunch' from a constable who's currently AWOL."

"We don't need jurisdiction," Karl said, his gaze fixed on the ceiling. "We need a leak. I'm going to feed Jonasson a narrative he can't ignore: that the shipment has been compromised from within and that a rival firm is moving to intercept it at the maritime border. He'll want to see the threat for himself. And when he surfaces to secure the perimeter, we'll be waiting."

A long, heavy silence stretched across the Baltic Sea. Karl could almost hear Maja's brain grinding against the illegality of the proposal.

"Let me get this straight," she said finally. "You're asking me to sanction a covert sting operation involving an AWOL constable, a retired carpenter, and a rusted-out fishing boat?"

Karl thought of the boat in the harbour, the way its engine hummed with hidden power. "The carpenter has a very fast fishing boat. And the constable is the only one who knows what Jonasson looks like when he's nervous."

Maja laughed. It was a tired, incredulous sound that bordered on the manic. “Karl, for God’s sake... do you even know what you’ve become? You’ve gone from the man who notices unwashed coffee mugs to a vigilante playing at high-seas piracy.”

“I’m the still man, Maja,” he said softly. “And I’m still watching. Are you in?”

“I’ll coordinate the ‘official’ blindness at the port,” she sighed. “But if this goes south, I’ve never heard of you.”

The gears of the trap began to turn the following morning. Lucas flew to Riga under a false name, carrying a battered aluminium toolbox that contained no hammers or saws. Instead, it held a high-gain satellite phone and a brick of Euro notes, Karl’s entire life savings. Ida had watched him withdraw the money without a single question; she simply squeezed his hand, her kind eyes full of a terrifyingly clear understanding.

Lucas, for his part, had treated the request like an invitation to a Sunday football match. “Finally,” he’d chuckled, checking the seal on the satellite phone. “Something more interesting than dry rot and dovetail joints.”

The bait was an exercise in psychological warfare. Karl sent an anonymous, encrypted message to Akmens Grupa's public-facing 'consultancy' portal. He adopted the persona of a disgruntled, overlooked logistics clerk at the Gothenburg shipping firm. The message was clipped, panicked, and specific: the radar shipment had been secretly rerouted to a secondary dock to avoid a supposed hijack by a rival paramilitary group. He used the codename "Folkviljan" a deliberate, stinging reference to a defunct Swedish extremist cell as the alleged hijackers.

It was a total fabrication. The shipment remained exactly where it was supposed to be, and "Folkviljan" didn't exist outside of history books. But Karl knew the professional mind; Jonasson wouldn't fear a ghost, but he would fear a competitor. He was counting on the man's professional pride and his pathological need for control.

That evening, the sun dipped below the Riga skyline, casting long, jagged shadows across the industrial wasteland of the docks. Karl's phone vibrated.

"He took the bait," Lucas said. He was positioned in a dive bar with a direct line of sight to the Akmens Grupa motor-pool. "I saw him an hour ago. He wasn't happy. He was barking orders at two heav-

ies near a black van—the same one you described. They're prepping a chase boat in the private slip. It's a high-spec RIB, twin outboards. Mercenary stuff."

Karl felt a cold thump of adrenaline. "How fast, Lucas?"

"Fast enough to catch a fishing boat and make it look like an accident in the swells," Lucas replied, his voice dropping an octave. "They're loading gear, Karl. Long bags. Not fishing rods."

Karl closed his eyes, visualizing the charts of the Kattegat strait, the way the deep-water channels narrowed near the border. The silence of his hotel room felt like the breath held before a plunge.

"Then we'd better be faster," Karl said. "Get to the harbour. I'm starting the clock."

He hung up and stood in the dark. For years, his silence had been a shield, a way to disappear. Now, it was a weapon. He checked his watch: 22:00. In six hours, they would be in the grey, churning heart of the Baltic, and the man who liked to be forgotten would ensure Jonasson never forgot his face.

11. The Chase on the Baltic

The Baltic Sea in April is a grey, unforgiving mother, cold and indifferent to the ambitions of men. Karl stood on the deck of *Elin's Hämnd,* named for Lucas's daughter, feeling the salt spray needle his skin like a thousand tiny shards of glass. The wind was a howling presence, tearing at his jacket and whipping his hair into his eyes, yet he stood as still as a statue on the prow.

Lucas was at the helm, his thick, carpenter's hands gripping the wheel with white-knuckled intensity. The easy, booming laugh that usually defined him had been replaced by a grim, focused silence. He stared out into the haze, his jaw set. Behind them, the Swedish coastline had bled into a thin, charcoal line against the horizon. Ahead lay nothing but the churning, slate-coloured swell. Somewhere in that vast, heaving emptiness, Jonasson was waiting.

Maja had played her part with the begrudging efficiency Karl had come to rely on. A Swedish Coast Guard cutter was currently loitering just inside the territorial limits, its engines idling, its crew ready to move. But Karl had been adamant, if Jonasson caught even a glimpse of a government hull, he would vanish back into the mist like a ghost. This encounter had to be intimate. It had to be close enough for Jonasson to feel the weight of his own arrogance.

The radar on the dash gave a sharp, rhythmic ping at 6:15 PM. A fast-moving contact had appeared, bearing northeast and carving through the water at thirty knots.

"That's him," Lucas said, his voice straining over the roar of the wind. "Twin outboards. That boat's built for speed, not comfort. He's moving like he owns the sea."

Karl raised his binoculars, bracing his elbows against his ribs to steady the image. A speck on the horizon rapidly expanded into a sharp, aggressive hull. It was black, the same matte, light-absorbing black as the van Karl had seen days ago. Jonasson wasn't attempting to hide or slip past them; he was coming head-on, a predator confident in its territory.

“He’s coming straight for us,” Lucas noted, a tremor of uncertainty in his tone. “Karl, if they’ve got rifles...”

“Let him come,” Karl said, his voice flat and unwavering.

The black boat closed the distance with terrifying speed, its bow slicing through the waves and sending up plumes of grey spray. Fifty metres out, the engines cut, the sudden silence of the mechanical roar replaced by the eerie whistling of the wind through the rigging. The two vessels drifted on the heavy swell, dancing a slow, rhythmic tension.

Jonasson stood at the bow of the black boat, dressed in a heavy tactical parka. He wasn’t smiling. Beside him stood two men, their stances wide and balanced, their hands tucked significantly near their waistbands.

“Constable Blom,” Jonasson called out, his voice carrying remarkably well over the water. “I believe I told you to walk away. Some people have a hard time with simple instructions.”

Karl stepped to the rail. He looked remarkably small and vulnerable in his simple grey jacket, his

hands empty and resting loosely on the cold metal. He didn't reach for a weapon or a badge. He simply watched.

"I don't walk, Jonasson," Karl called back. "I've spent my whole life watching. You should have considered what I might see."

Jonasson tilted his head, a predatory flicker in his eyes. "And what do you see now? A fishing boat with a carpenter at the wheel? You're out of your depth, Blom. Literally. You're going to watch yourself die in a very cold, very deep grave."

Karl leaned forward slightly. "The radar shipment isn't coming, Jonasson. There was no leak from the port, and there is no rival group moving in on your territory. That story was a ghost, whispered into the right ears so you would feel the need to protect your investment personally. This wasn't a heist. It was a vacuum. And you rushed in to fill it."

Jonasson's eyes narrowed, his gaze darting to the horizon, then to his own men. A seed of doubt took root in his expression. "You're bluffing. You're alone out here. No backup. No jurisdiction."

"Look at your GPS," Karl suggested.

"We're in international waters," Jonasson spat, though he motioned for one of his men to check the console. "Thirty kilometres out. You have no more authority here than the fish."

"You're at twenty-nine point eight kilometres," Karl corrected him. "The maritime border was redrawn last year following the new Baltic survey. The charts were updated three months ago. I noticed the filing in the mayor's office during a routine check. Your GPS is running on legacy data, Jonasson. You're currently sitting in a Swedish trap."

Jonasson pulled out his phone, his thumb hovering over the screen. He hissed a curse. "No signal."

"Maja has a jammer active on the cutter," Karl said. "It's been shadowing your signature since you left the harbour. You were so focused on the boat in front of you that you forgot to look behind."

As if on cue, a massive silhouette emerged from the mist behind the black boat. The Coast Guard cutter, a leviathan of steel and authority, surged forward. Its blue lights cut through the grey gloom, strobing against the dark water. A booming loudspeaker shattered the remaining silence, the voice amplified and mechanical.

"This is the Swedish Coast Guard. Heave to and prepare to be boarded. You are in Swedish territorial waters. Any resistance will be met with force."

Jonasson stood perfectly still. For a moment, Karl thought he might reach for a weapon—that the man's ego would demand a violent end. Instead, Jonasson let out a short, sharp laugh that sounded like dry leaves skittering over pavement.

"You," Jonasson said, staring at Karl as the armed boarding party in black tactical gear leapt onto his deck. "You planned every bit of it. The cut cable at the harbour, the 'suspicious' spotter, the fake shipment... you played me like a cheap fiddle."

"No," Karl said softly as the *Elin's Hämnd* drifted closer. "I didn't play you. I just observed the pieces you were already moving. I simply gave you a different mirror to look into."

As the officers forced Jonasson to his knees and secured his hands, the criminal kingpin looked up at Karl one last time. The anonymity that had always protected Karl was gone, replaced by something sharper and far more dangerous.

"You're not a constable anymore, Blom," Jonasson

said, his voice strained. “You’re something else entirely.”

Karl looked out at the grey sea, the wind finally beginning to die down as the sun dipped below the horizon. “I’m exactly the same,” he replied. “I’ve just decided that some things are worth speaking about.”

The silence returned, but for the first time in Karl’s life, it didn’t feel like a hiding place. It felt like a beginning.

12. The Truth That Needed No Loud Voice

The trial was held in the heart of Stockholm, conducted within the sterile, hushed confines of a closed courtroom. Security was suffocating; the air felt heavy with the weight of state secrets. The evidence presented was a cold, methodical dismantling of a conspiracy: the surgically cut cable, Holmgren's trembling but resolute testimony, and the labyrinthine financial trail that led from the shell companies of Akmens Grupa directly to the digital doorstep of a foreign intelligence service.

Jonasson sat in the dock, his face a mask of defiant stone until the verdict was read. Convicted of attempted murder and conspiracy to commit an act of terrorism, he was sentenced to life. A week later, the news cycle erupted again when Juris Kalniņš was hauled out of a luxury villa in Riga, cuffed and extradited to face charges as an accessory. The house of cards hadn't just fallen; it had been incinerated.

In the aftermath, the glare of the public eye turned toward Växjö. Mayor Sten Viklund stood behind a forest of microphones, the glass and timber of the Lake House reflecting a dozen camera flashes.

"We owe our safety to the tireless work of the Security Service and our local police," Viklund announced, his voice projecting the polished warmth of a man who had narrowly escaped a watery grave. He paused, his gaze sweeping to the rear of the hall. "But most of all, we owe it to one very observant constable, a man who refused to look away when the world was looking elsewhere."

The cameras swiveled with mechanical hunger, seeking out the hero. They found Karl standing against the back wall, his uniform pressed, his posture as rigid as a terminal post. He didn't offer a thumb's up or a modest duck of the head. He didn't smile. He simply stood there, his pale grey eyes absorbing the light of the flashes without reflecting a single flicker of pride. He let the moment wash over him, waiting for the silence to return.

At home, Ida sat on the edge of the sofa, the television screen illuminating her face in the darkened living room. As the camera lingered on Karl's impassive features, she felt a sudden, sharp prick of tears.

She wiped them away with the back of a hand that had spent the day healing others, then stood up and walked into the kitchen. There was comfort in the peeling of potatoes, in the familiar sizzle of the pan. Some things changed, but the need for a warm meal remained.

Lucas, however, had no intention of letting the moment pass quietly. He commandeered Paviljongen for the evening, throwing a party that spilled out onto the pavement. The pub was a roar of laughter, clinking glass, and the smell of spilled ale.

"There we were!" Lucas shouted over the din, standing on a stool with a glass held high. "The engine was screaming, the water was like iron, and I look over at Blom. Most men would be praying or pukeing, not this one. He's got that look, you know the one? Like he's just deciding which brand of milk to buy. He says, 'Lucas, go left.' Just like that! And thank God I did, or we'd all be fish food!"

Karl sat in his usual corner, though tonight it was the centre of an admiring orbit. He did something he had never done before: he finished a full pint of heavy bitter. He listened to Lucas's embellishments, the height of the waves, the speed of the chase, the supposed arsenal Jonasson had been wielding and he

didn't utter a word of correction. He had learned that some truths were too lean for the public; they needed the fat of a good story to keep people warm.

Later that night, the air had turned crisp and silver under a swollen moon. Karl and Ida walked home together, their footsteps synchronised on the cobbles. As they reached the harbour, Karl slowed to a halt.

Folkviljan was back at its mooring. The damage to its hull had been seamlessly repaired, the wood polished until it gleamed like obsidian in the moonlight. It bobbed gently, the water slapping against the quay in a rhythmic, peaceful pulse.

Ida slipped her hand into his, her fingers interlaced with his calloused palm. She looked at the boat, then up at him. "Are you happy, Karl?"

Karl didn't answer immediately. He looked at the silver lake, considering the weight of the word. Happiness always seemed like a loud, fluttering thing, something that didn't fit in his quiet rooms. But as he stood there, no longer looking for the shadow of a black van or the glint of a hidden lens, he felt a strange, settled weight in his chest.

“I’m still,” he said eventually. He squeezed her hand, his thumb tracing the line of her knuckles. “But it’s a different kind of still now. The air doesn’t feel like it’s waiting for something to break.”

Ida leaned her head against his shoulder, the wool of his jacket scratchy and familiar against her temple. “That’s enough,” she whispered. “That’s more than enough.”

They finished the walk home in a comfortable, shared silence. The black van was a ghost of the past, its satellite antennas and tinted windows long since impounded. The fake security men had vanished into the machinery of the state. The man called Jonasson was a number in a cell.

Karl returned to his apartment, to the smell of old paper and the military corners of his bed. His life resumed its steady, predictable rhythm. He still watched the street for four minutes every morning; he still walked the same twelve-minute route to the station.

But the world had shifted its axis slightly. Now, when he passed the mayor’s residence, the new guards, genuine professionals this time, offered a sharp, respectful nod as he passed. When he entered

the pub, the roar dipped just a fraction as men looked at him with something bordering on awe.

He lay awake that night, not with the strained watchfulness of a sentry, but with a profound, resonant peace. He had always suspected that the loudest voices rarely held the most truth. He had proven that a man who said nothing could hear everything. A whisper could, indeed, move mountains, and a man who chose to remain still could be the very thing that moved the world forward.

The End

The still man

Thanos Kalamidas

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A Constable Karl Blom Mystery

THE still MAN

Thanos Kalamidas, a multipublished writer, cartoonist and illustrator; born and grew up in a picturesque neighbourhood on the mountainside of Hymettus in Athens, Greece. Then his life took him to Berlin, Germany and to London, UK for studies. After a brief stay in Yorkshire he moved his life to Paris, France while working in Tokyo, Japan and in Cape Town, South Africa. In the last 25 years he became a permanent Scandinavian resident and recently, in his glorious sixth decade, he moved to a scenic village in the Växjö area.

THANOS KALAMIDAS

Author of the Polisinspektör Mikael Hansson series